DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 228 597 CG 016 624

AUTHOR Lumsden, Alec; And Others
TITLE Attributions of Responsibility for the Outcomes of Competitive Events.
PUB DATE Jun 81
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Psychological Association (42nd, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, June 3-5, 1981).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Athletics; *Attribution Theory; Bias; Cognitive Processes; *Competition; Foreign Countries; *Motivation; Participant Characteristics; Performance; Responsibility; *Success
IDENTIFIERS Canada

ABSTRACT

Previous laboratory research has found that people take more personal responsibility for their performance following success than failure. To extend these findings of a self-serving bias to real-world competitive settings, two field studies were conducted, one with 27 intramural basketball teams and one with 20 pairs of squash players. Players attributed more responsibility to the winners than to the losers for the game outcome. Subsequent laboratory research using observer subjects demonstrated that false information about the outcome of a sporting event was sufficient to produce biased responsibility judgments. Similarly, observers attributed more responsibility to winners than to losers for the outcome of such real world events as wars and economic competitions. The observer data suggest that non-motivational factors are involved in the differential attribution of responsibility to winners and losers. Observers may presume that both parties in a competition intend to win and that more responsibility is given to the individual or team whose outcomes and intentions correspond. A laboratory study supported this hypothesis. (Author/JAC)

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Alec Lumsden, Michael Ross, Michael Conway
University of Waterloo
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

CG 016624

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Paper presented at the Canadian Psychological Association Convention in Toronto, June 1981.

Attributions of Responsibility for the Outcome of Competitive Events

Alec Lumsden, Michael Ross, Michael Conway
University of Waterloo

Previous laboratory research has found that people take more personal responsibility for their performance following success than failure (see Zuckerman, 1979, for a review). One purpose of the present research was to extend these findings of a self-serving bias to real-world competitive settings. In two field studies, one with 27 intramural basketbal teams and one with 20 pairs of squash players, players attributed more responsibility to the winners than to the losers for the game outcome. Subsequent laboratory research using observer subjects demonstrated that false information about the outcome of a sporting event was sufficient to produce biased responsibility judgments. Similarly, observers attributed more responsibility for the outcome of such real world events as wars and economic competitions to winners than to losers. While not discounting motivational factors for participants, the observer data suggest that non-motivational factors are involved in the differential attribution of responsibility to winners and losers. It may be that observers presume that both parties in a competition intend to win and that more responsibility is given to the individual or team whose outcomes and intentions correspond. A laboratory study in which both the outcome and the performers' intentions were manipulated supported this hypothesis.

I am going to talk about research that Mike Ross, Mike Conway, and I have conducted in the past year on attributions of responsibility following winning and losing in sports settings. I will be focussing on 2 experiments that attempt to uncover mediating processes for these attributions. Most previous researchers have examined the effects of performance level on attributions of responsibility in laboratory settings with individual performers: subjects are induced to succeed or fail at a task and then asked to indicate their degree of responsibility for the outcome. One finding has been obtained quite consistently in this context: people accept more personal responsibility for their successes than for their failures (see Zuckerman, 1979, Bradley, 1978 and Miller and Ross, 1975 for reviews of this topic). Past work that we have done shows that a similar asymmetry in responsibility attributions is evidenced by participants in competitive field settings following winning and losing. In one study we interviewed 20 pairs of squash players the evening after a match and asked them to attribute responsibility for the match outcome. In a separate study players on 27 basketball teams were interviewed 3 to 5 days following a game and asked to attribute responsibility for the game outcome. In both cases winners thought they themselves were more responsible for the game outcome than their opponents, whereas losers tended to divide the responsibility equally.

Most of the laboratory research on performance level and judgments of responsibility attempts to explain the asymmetry in subjects' attributions from a motivational viewpoint. It is argued that people take more responsibility for successes than for failures because they are motivated to maintain their perceived sense of control over their environment. Or because they are motivated to present a favourable impression to others. Or because they wish to associate themselves with positive outcomes and dissociate themselves from negative outcomes. On the other hand, their have been arguments that a great deal of the laboratory generated data used as evidence of motivational factors could be explained on an information processing basis. Of course we cannot be certain that any of these explanations will apply to our basketball and squash players. There are a number of differences between the past laboratory research and these 2 field studies. First, success and failure and winning and losing are not completely analogous concepts. Second, most laboratory tasks are not zero sum games the way that sports are. And third, subjects in laboratory studies are usually randomly assigned to conditions, whereas the subjects in our 2 studies were self-selected. Nonetheless, the results in these sports studies show a strong parallel with those obtained in laboratory studies: winning players take more personal responsibility than losing players do. Just as individuals who are successful at a laboratory task take more responsibility for the outcome than those who

fail.

Why are winners more likely than losers to take responsibility for the outcome of the game? One possibility is that this reflects reality. Perhaps people win because they seize the initiative and force the outcome of the game. Alternatively, perhaps responsibility should be divided more equally but winners take more responsibility to enhance their self-esteem, feelings of control, or to create a favourable impression on others. Or there may be personality differences between winning and losing players that can account for the differing tendency to accept personal responsibility.

In the first experiment I am about to report we examined a quite different interpretation from the above; perhaps people generally tend to view winners as more responsible for outcomes than losers. In short, perhaps the relation between winning and losing and attributions of responsibility reflects, in part, a widely shared belief that winners bring about their own fate.

We tested this collective wisdom hypothesis by having subjects observe part of a sporting event on videotape and then giving them false feedback about the outcome. 35 male and female subjects watched a 10-minute videotape segment of a volleyball game played between Poland and the Soviet Union

in the 1976 Olympic Games. At the end of the segment the game was tied 5 - 5. After viewing the tape, half the subjects were told that the Poles went on to win the game. The remaining subjects were told that the Soviet Union won the game. The subjects were then asked to indicate, on the basis of the portion of the game they had seen, which team was more responsible for the game outcome. Note that all subjects saw the same videotape; that the game outcome was provided after the tape had been viewed; and that some subjects were told the Poles had won the game and others that the Soviet Union had won. The results were unambiguous: 74% of the subjects reported that the team which they thought had won the game was more responsible for the game outcome.

I suggested that the relation between attributions of responsibility and performance level obtained from the squash players and basketball teams could be explained in a number of ways. Only one of these explanations can also account for the results of this experiment, however. These attributions cannot reflect differential performance by winners and losers because half the subjects thought one team had won, and half thought the other team had won. It is also unlikely that the attributions directly reflect concerns for self-esteem maintenance or personal control because the subjects were passive observers rather than winners or losers themselves. Nor can personality differ-

ences yield the reported results because subjects were randomly assigned to conditions rather than self-selected. Instead the data show that winners are perceived to be more responsible for outcomes than losers independent of their actual performance.

These data suggest that there is a widely shared belief or causal schema in our culture that winners are more responsible for outcomes than losers. Yet, in a sense we have just pushed the explanation for the causal asymmetry back one step. What is the origin of the causal schema?

There are a number of possibilities that could be considered. First, the asymmetry may reflect a basic truth. Perhaps causality does and should reside with the winners. Once the rule is learned, however, it may be applied too generally, as in the experiment just reported in which the evidence subjects were asked to consider in formulating their attributions could not support their conclusions that the winners were more responsible for the outcome.

Although this argument may seem plausible, we believe that it is not valid. In any interactive setting, what people do affects what other people do. Thus success and failure will usually depend on the actions of both sides in the fray; untangling causality is not a simple matter at all. It seems unlikely, therefore, that the asymmetry in

causal attributions reflects an unambiguous reality.

Another possible source of the causal schema that we considered was that observers may tend to focus their attention on winners rather than on losers. This strategy would enable observers to experience the joys of success empathically, and may also permit them to learn from and emulate success. This differential attention to winners is reflected on the sports pages of newspapers in which the exploits of winners are depicted graphically, whereas the foibles of losers receive remarkably little attention unless the newspaper is reporting on the loss suffered by a home team or favorite son.

Would a differential focus on winners lead observers to view winners as primarily responsible for an outcome? The answer, from previous research, appears to be yes. The more attention an observer pays to a person in an interaction, the more causally dominant that person is seen as being (Taylor and Fiske, 1978).

But differential focus of attention on winners and losers seems like a weak explanation because although it might explain the origin of a causal schema, it cannot explain the results of the experiment just reported without recourse to this causal schema mechanism. Subjects in our experiment all saw the same taped performance and were told who the

winners and losers were after viewing the tape. Clearly, differential focus of attention by itself could not have produced our results.

We looked for a more immediate and plausible explanation for our findings. It was then that we considered the role of the performers' intentions. If all performers intended to win, and if all observers presumed that all performers intended to win, then the win/loss factor may have been confounded in our past research both for participants and observers. When a performer won an event then his or her outcome and intention corresponded and they were given most of the responsibility for the outcome. When a performer lost an event, then his or her outcome and intention did not correspond and he or she was given less responsibility for the outcome. Compared with the reality explanation, this idea was at least capable of being empirically tested and, if it was supported, provided more direct information on subjects' causal attributions for competitive events than the differential focus of attention explanation. So, in the second experiment I will be reporting, we hypothesized that observers will typically assume that both winners and losers intend to win and that greater responsibility is given to performers whose outcomes and intentions correspond than to those whose outcomes and intentions do not correspond.

We tested this hypothesis by having 88 male and female

subjects watch a 3-minute videotape segment of a college weightlifter being interviewed prior to a competition, and then watch a 10-minute tape of him and his opponent compete at weightlifting. During the taped interview the performer let it be known either that he intended to win, that he intended to lose, or said nothing about his intentions for the competition. After watching the same videotape of the 2 performers weightlifting, half the subjects were told that the person interviewed had won and half were told that the person interviewed had lost the competition. The design, then, was a 2 (outcome: won/lost) X 3 (intent: win/lose/not stated) between subjects factorial.

A plausible cover story was developed so that the performer's explanation for intending to lose made sense. And the study was counter balanced to neutralize effects due to differences between the 2 performers. Half the subjects saw one stimulus performer interviewed and half saw the other performer interviewed.

The results supported our hypothesis. Observers attributions of responsibility to the performer were greatest when outcome and intent corresponded and least when they did not correspond. That is, the performer was given most responsibility when he said he intended to win and won and when he said he intended to lose and lost. The control conditions in which no intent was stated were in the

predicted direction with the winner being given more responsibility than the loser. Stating that he intended to win exaqerated the responsibility the performer was given relative to the control condition. But stating that he intended to lose reversed the attributions of responsibility so that the performer was now given more responsibility when he lost than when he won.

These results suggest that people presume that participants in competitive events intend to win and that it is the correspondence between the presumed intent of the participants' and the outcome that effects attributions of responsibility rather than the informational value of performance level by itself.

To summarize our findings: First, the lab research which shows that people attribute more responsibility to themselves following success than failure may generalize to competitive real world settings and winning and losing. Second, the differences in responsibility judgments to winners and losers is shared by both participants and unbiased observers. Winners are given more responsibility for the outcome than losers. Third, for observers at least, information processing can account for a significant amount of the variance in this causal asymmetry. Finally, it would appear that observers typically assume that all participants are intending to win. And that more responsibility is given

to the performer when outcome and intention correspond than when they do not.

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